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**Tracing Cultural Memory in the Work of Adriana Corral**

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**Tracing Cultural Memory in the Work of Adriana Corral**

**by**

**Emily Lauren Butts**

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## **Dedication**

For all the women in my family.



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## **Abstract**

### **Tracing Cultural Memory in the Work of Adriana Corral**

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Using ash and soil as her primary mediums, Adriana Corral presents loss by using what remains when matter is taken to its most basic form: the earth that we stand on and the burned remnants of what has been. To create ashes, Corral burns lists of victims' names, or more frequently, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, gesturing toward gross human rights abuses, corruption, and state violence prevalent along the US-Mexico border, and a document's inability to protect against it. She burns these documents and presents them as abstractions of themselves, appearing only as a fleeting trace of what used to be. In contrast to her portrayals of erasure, Corral incorporates the hypervisible emblems of nationhood into her practice: specifically, the flag under which people gather, and the bald eagle, the national bird of the United States, representing the country's mindset of hemispheric dominance that relies on designating some people and groups invisible. This thesis seeks to interrogate both how the notion of erasure circulates within visual culture, and how we, as viewers, receive it.

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## Preface: In the Archive

The first studio visit I did with Corral was unlike any I had done before. In her studio, there were images of blueprints, Babylonian tablet inscriptions, photographs of upturned soil, notes about challenged and banned books, an exhibition brochure from *Banned, Burned, Seized, and Censored* from the Harry Ransom Center, all printed on 8 1/2 x 11” printer paper and taped in a salon style hang on her eleven foot tall studio wall. Taped alongside the images were tiny Ziploc bags of the aquamarine paint chips from walls from labor camps in Germany and chips the exact same color collected from Rio Vista Farm—a Bracero processing center—just outside of El Paso, Texas. Next to the paint chips were sticky notes with the words, “afterimage” and “convalescent” with brief definitions for each (“an impression of a vivid sensation (especially a visual image) retained after the stimulation has ceased” and “recuperating, recovering—progress toward recovery of health,” respectively). On the foldout table to the right, there were rows of bags of ashes that she had burned from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and soil she had excavated from crime sites in Ciudad Juarez or that she had mailed to herself from her trip to Berlin, all packed away neatly and labeled with the location from which the material came and the date on which they were found. She showed me the new ash and soil pastel sticks she had made from these samples. The studio may have looked tidy, but what I was actually looking at was utter chaos.

Corral is a voracious collector of things. Each time I visited her in the studio, the images, words, fragments, and objects on the walls might have shifted, but still remained

connected in some way. The material laid there was evidence of some sort, a forensic lab wherein Corral reconstructs and reassembles pieces of a puzzle. Individual parts had been separated from their whole, but each carried a story about the material world that held part of a history that she so desperately wanted to extract. These objects—fragmentary, incomplete material—carried bits of modern-history illustrating something deep, something unacknowledged, in the grain with which she was attempting to grapple.

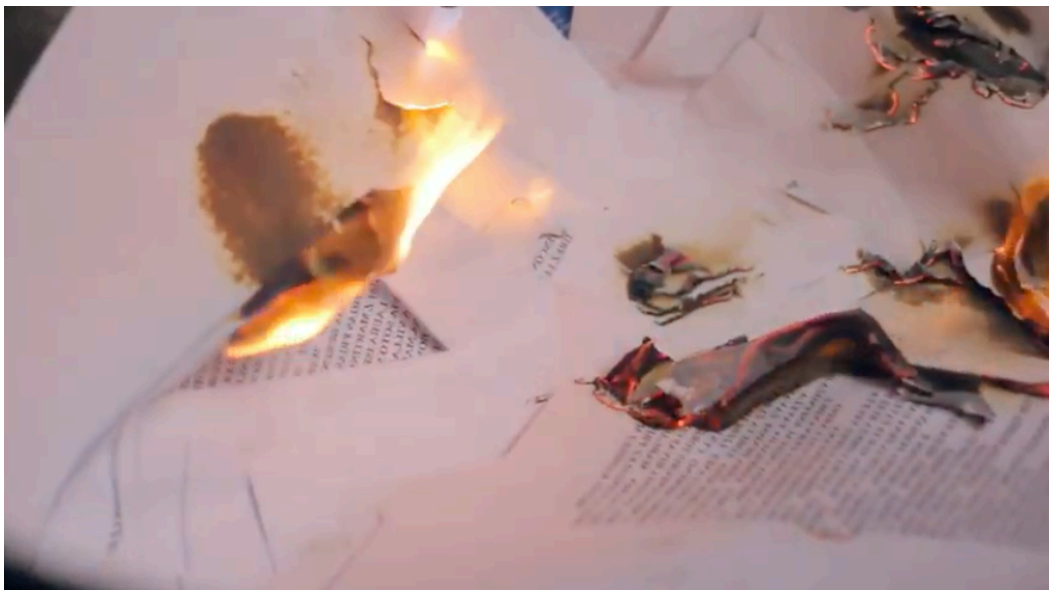


Figure 1: Image still from Corral's *Within the Ashes*, 2013.

This desire to piece together parts that do not immediately seem to fit, through the act of collecting, excavating, burning, or destroying, stems from a frustration with the images and documents that history does not produce for us. Or perhaps the images that it does produce, but do not make sense within our individual renderings. How can we

confront the gaps of history—or tell the stories that we desire to hear, but that history does not have room for—or those that may have disappeared from the material world *through* materiality? We cannot encounter history through some sort of grand historical narrative—marking itself as a straight, level line, a collection of information adding up to a single point—but rather as palimpsests upon each other. We can only approach history through fragments. Corral takes the objects that men produce, manipulate, use, exchange, disassemble, or even destroy, and presents them with the intention of showing us a process rather than as a dictate the way things are.

#### **DESTRUCTION = PRODUCTION**

Between 1957 and 1962, Raphael Montañez Ortiz authored the text “Destructivism: A Manifesto”, which outlined destructivist artists’ opposition to the biblical myth of creation and their belief that, instead, it is through destruction, disassembling, and unmaking that new art forms, and even life, can emerge.<sup>1</sup> The artist states destruction as a form of catharsis and healing, “the artist’s sense of destruction will no longer be turned inward in fear. The art that utilizes the destructive processes will purge, for as it gives death, so it will give life.”<sup>2</sup> Destructivism looks at the generative properties of erasure: it is violent, but it is also healing. It is a method of survival.

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<sup>1</sup> Kristen Stiles, "Survival Ethos and Destruction Art," *Discourse* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1992), 86.

<sup>2</sup> Rafael Montanez Ortiz. "Destructivism : A manifesto by Rafael Montañez Ortiz, 1962". Rafael Montañez Ortiz: Years of the Warrior 1960, Years of the Pysche 1988. -- New York, NY: El Museo del Barrio, 1988, 52.





Figure 2: Raphael Montañez Ortiz, Duncan Terrace Piano Destruction Concert at Destruction Art Symposium, London, 1966.

Postwar avant-garde movements of the 1950s and 60s examined social detachment in a world that had become defined by endless war, mass production, an apocalyptic threat of the atomic bomb, a new emergence of neocolonial economic empires, and civil rights movements. Therefore, destructivist artists only mimicked the violence they witnessed in the world around them. Some fifty years after Ortiz authored the Destructivism manifesto, how has the social and political climate shifted? It is, arguably, still one defined by endless war; in fact, it feels like much of history is repeating itself, revealing to us that time is not linear, but rather cyclical. I look to Ortiz's

method of destruction as one that reflects a lived experience—or proximity to someone else’s lived experience, or even one viewed through newspapers or television sets of faraway wars—to better understand how artists confront generations of trauma and violence. Can destroying mean the same thing as producing? And how might observing the two as intertwined help us better understand how to emerge from erasure?

Ortiz destroyed materials from the domestic sphere—home furnishings and videos—so that the work became a ruin of itself as the original object becomes unidentifiable. The new object marks its own place claiming a status as art. His destruction functions as catharsis—the performances a kind of healing ritual—as the object’s afterlife as a ruin imparts it with the status of evidence of its previous life. Ortiz’s practice confronts the question, what can and cannot be erased? And what are the social and political consequences of reproducing such violence?

In “The art museum as ritual,” Carol Duncan reflects on the anthropologist Edmund Leach’s writings saying that he “noticed that every culture mounts some symbolic effort to contradict the irreversibility of time and its end result of death. He argued that themes of rebirth, rejuvenation, and the spiritual recycling or perpetuation of the past deny the fact of death by substituting for it symbolic structures in which past time returns.”<sup>3</sup> How do we observe objects that reflect our own internalization of someone else’s death, someone else’s past—objects that have not disappeared

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Duncan, "The art museum as ritual," *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (March 1995), 10.

completely, but that leave traces of what they once were—within our own temporal framework?

In this text, I hope to elucidate not only how Corral interrogates the circulation of erasure within visual culture—vis-à-vis her ash floor installations and her ephemeral interventions into the built environment—but also how we, as viewers, receive it. How can viewing her work, which only leaves traces of what once was, make us think critically about how we digest objects that have nearly become invisible to the naked eye? I look at the institutions that are understood to produce knowledge (archives, museums), and how they have been collectively internalized to read Corral's work. I approach her work from both within and outside of these realms in hopes of better understanding how framing impacts the reading of an artwork, as well as the viewer's position in viewing it.

As I question notions of historical memory or the ethics of representation in Corral's practice, I have to reflect on my own position in doing so. Investigating issues of human rights abuses has to be confronted from multiple positionalities—not only as it is understood in current international law discourses, but also the human rights abuses that span centuries, often backed by racial, gendered, or classed domination that are often *not* discussed as human rights issues. Corral, the artist, and myself, an art historian, only represent a very select pool of people haunted by troubling histories and the systems of control that continue to operate. Because of this, I choose at times to allow for my personal voice to seep in; but I also believe that any kind of personal reflection requires some level of critical distance to be rendered legible. I hope that this thesis reflects how I

ask these questions not only as an individual, but also at times in dialogue with Corral, to try to grapple with my own position within these discourses. Observing her work in her studio, within exhibition spaces, and even throughout her research process has enabled me to critically reflect on my own place not only as an art historian, curator, or art viewer, but also as a consumer of history and visual culture.

#### **“NO ARCHIVE WILL RESTORE YOU”<sup>4</sup>**

A good part of any day in the archive is spent inhaling dust, which may be one reason the place exhilarates some people, and causes others severe unease—Carolyn Steedman argues that this is an occupational hazard any serious historian must grapple with.<sup>5</sup> To spend time in the archive is to look for institutionalized social memory: a clearly marked open road that maps out the past to understand our present or how we even got to the archive in the first place, but to never find it. What has been collected, valued, appraised, deposited, and conserved within the archive, and what has been omitted? You get the sense that it’s a possibility that the seemingly insignificant things

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<sup>4</sup> Poet Julietta Singh, writes “The scholars are scurrying / to make novel declarations about animals and animacies, / the life of matter, the post-human / We custodians of knowledge / fracking our keen minds / in the bowels of institutions, / stirring up more beautiful worlds / Look at that light-even shadows / of leaves make it known that / no archive will restore you, / no text but those we cannot read in “No Archive Will Restore You,” *The American Poetry Review* 46, no. 3 (May/June 2017): [Page 23].

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

that people hold onto, collect, pass between generations, and, in some cases, institutionalize within an archive, are actually significant, have meaning, and tell us something that no other object, person, or collection could. Archives also highlight where gaps are in a collection, where there is discontinuity, or where we desire closure where there is none.

Once we locate the box we are looking for and determine which folder we will be investigating, we spend hours being seduced by unconnected parts in the search for something to hold onto. To be in an archive is to experience the eagerness to close circles that seem so urgently in need of closing, but instead of finding a circle, a road, an origin, or any type of ordering of experience into discrete categories, we find many kinds of beginnings. We hope for the mastery of the language that other readers in the rooms seem to know, but the best we might do is achieve fluency in cognitive dissonance. To be in an archive is to try to keep the dead with us through obsessively remembering the things they held onto. And in doing so, we can shape it, render it, and remake the person, an object, or a letter, in our own image.

In the summer of 2018, I joined Corral in Washington, DC during her time as an artist fellow at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Prior to my arrival, she would call me on the phone: “this is *historical*” she would say, or, “the *juice* is there.” She says “juice” meaning the goods, the gem, the one document that will validate this project and the painstaking process of archival research that she was putting herself through. Corral was on a mission: where was that one document that would prove all the horrors that were told to be true? We had heard of there being quarantine facilities placed on the

border, as an early form of medical gatekeeping, where immigrants were deloused with gasoline and other cyanide-based chemicals as they crossed the border for work every day.<sup>6</sup> We looked for evidence in the National Archives and Records Administration and the Library of Congress for personal and business letters, cartographic maps, Sanborn fire insurance maps, blueprints, bag tags, hiring documents, anything that might give us a sign that we were on the right path. She found evidence, but there wasn't enough physical *proof*.

Earlier that summer, we began research in El Paso: we visited the El Paso Historical Society, the El Paso Public Library, the special collections at The University of Texas at El Paso. There, we read a lot, examined countless maps, but we also found gaping holes in the collection such as a written list of pictures and their description, with no photographs to follow. So we went to Washington DC to find the photographs that were mysteriously missing in El Paso. We wanted to connect the dots between the signs and traces that we had found, and what better place to do so than our nation's capital? And so, we went all the way to Washington DC to learn a story about the Texas-Mexico border, so far from where we started.

By the time I arrived in DC, she had been there for two weeks, had gone through orientation with her sponsors at the Smithsonian, had her researcher cards, the bus route

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the idea of better breeding as means of racial subordination in the United States, please see Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults & Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, 2005. In the text, she analyzes US-Mexico immigration policy and the discourse around eugenics that influenced it. Rachel Carson's seminal work *Silent Spring*, 1962, gives an in depth look at the silent killers in our natural environment; this seeps into the bodies of the people that labor the land. *Fevered Measures: Public Health and Race at the Texas-Mexico Border, 1848-1942* by Oscar J. Martínez, from 1978, observes this discourse form the foundation of Texas as a state until the beginning of the Second World War.

and times memorized, her own booth in the hallway where she would take lunch. She taught me this ritual: going through a metal detector, crossing the marble lobby, going down two flights of stairs to the locker room to drop all of our personal belongings or comforts that were deemed unessential by archive staff, going back up those two flights of stairs, passing another security checkpoint, taking the elevator up one floor to enter into the reading room, checking in at the front desk, visiting a consultation librarian that pulled folders for us, and finally sitting and waiting for them to arrive.

When we first began, we did close readings of every document, and we did so ravenously. We did so mostly separately, but sometimes together. It was imperative not to leave anything unread. We had our cast of characters: Tom Lea Jr., the mayor in El Paso from 1915-1917; Rupert Blue, the US Surgeon General from 1912-1920; and Carmelita Torres, the woman who led the 1917 Bath Riots at the Santa Fe Bridge between El Paso and Juarez. “Girl,” she would say and nudge me to stop what I was doing and wheel over to her side of the partition, “look at *this*.” Mayor Tom Lea wrote to the Rupert Blue: “HUNDREDS DIRTY LOUSEY DESTITUTE MEXICANS ARRIVING AT EL PASO DAILY / WILL UNDOUBTEDLY BRING AND SPREAD TYPHUS UNLESS A QUARANTINE IS PLACED AT ONCE.” We knew of this history thanks to Dr. Romo, but holding it in our hands was a different story.<sup>7</sup> We wanted to find the social and moral lesson hidden in these papers and we were going to do so through sensory impressions: sight, touch, smell, sound. We felt something when we

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<sup>7</sup> David Dorado Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juarez, 1893-1923* (El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2005).

touched something that Mayor Lea had also touched. We inhaled the dust and listened to the silence of other readers reading as we looked for the evidence that would make a good story and eventually, a meaningful art installation.

It turned out that the National Archives did not have what we had hoped for, which were answers. Instead we left with more questions. The photographs that were missing in El Paso were also missing in Washington DC, with the exception of one photocopy of a photograph. In the map room, we were told that we could not look at the items we had requested for fear of them being “too fragile to handle.” And that’s when I realized how much a certain level of fear led everyday practices both within and outside the archive. There was a fear for what is lost or what is behind a locked door, yes, but that wasn’t the only kind. There was a sense of fear for what might be lost in the future if we were already meeting resistance on our first visit to the archive.

This is when I learned that Corral’s practice is both about intervention and withdrawal, accessibility and constraints, what they forbid you to write, what you are allowed to view, what permissions you are given, and how we can better understand how these things contradict and intersect through what we do and do not see. She investigates traces and marks as forms of memory lasting throughout or getting lost within temporality. In contrast, she incorporates the hypervisible symbols that give the perception of stability and permanence, such as the American bald eagle that we saw every morning as we entered NARA, or the documents protected by a heavily securitized archive in our nation’s capital. Protected against whom? How do these modes of thought



connect to influence our everyday lives and those which are embedded within our individual and collective psyches?

The relationship between these symbols and the histories they obfuscate is tense and complex; Corral's work helps us understand how they are not only interrelated and even codependent, but also contradictory and paradoxical. By reenacting and appropriating the violence of forced erasure, and the emblems that make them so, Corral's aesthetic practice reflects the social and political structures that threaten historical erasure. In doing so, her use of materials highlights the importance of material visibility--invisibility (and that which is ephemeral) and hypervisibility (those which can be viewed as secure)—to challenge the perceived permanence of historical narratives.

#### **FORGETTING IS THE SUREST MEANS OF ERASURE**

In a society that suffers from social amnesia, we place the responsibility of remembering in the visibility of the trace: an image, document, archive, recording, monument, or any tangible remain of what has been. This visibility, and in some cases active preservation efforts, gives the impression of historical importance or significance. What is visible carries with it historical and cultural capital: visibility can determine an object's or subject's centrality or cast it to the periphery.

So it turns out not to be about History, but maybe about the stories people tell, about themselves and about other people—or what Avery Gordon defines as complex personhood, meaning that even those called “other” are never that, and that really, life is

more complicated than a neat historical narrative, or a set of clear binaries some might want us to believe.<sup>8</sup> She states,

Power can be invisible, it can be fantastic, it can be dull and routine. It can be obvious, it can reach you by the baton of the police, it can speak the language of your thoughts and desire. It can feel like remote control, it can exhilarate like liberation, it can travel through time, and it can drown you in the present...it can harm you without ever seeming to touch you. It is systematic and it is particularistic and it is often both at the same time. It causes dreams to live and dreams to die.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, life is complicated; it is both straightforward and convoluted. Individual troubles, social worlds and power relations of particular times and places jumble together to create what becomes available as a narrative—to both remember and forget—and what is left for the rest of us to figure out for ourselves.

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This thesis will be presented in two halves: the first chapter addresses the ethics of representation within discourses of abstraction and (non) figuration and what level of visual literacy is required of a viewer to approach these topics within an exhibition space.

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<sup>8</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 3.

How does geometry shift when forms are considered within the ritual of a museum space? If geometric forms are thought to be universally understood, how does this impact the production of affect? I consider ash floor pieces by Corral alongside the work of Teresa Margolles, a Mexican conceptual artist who employs both abstraction as well as figuration (in the format of Mexican sensational journalism), representing either side of the spectrum of depicting the human body. Abstraction renders the body is invisible, or at least illegible as a body, and one that forefronts the violence enacted on a body. This section focuses on how to represent the unrepresentable nature of pain, loss, and trauma, the production of affect through form, and how this may be read from within the white cube.<sup>10</sup>

The second chapter of my thesis challenges the relationship between empire and erasure, the border and visibility, and the vulnerability of cultural memory. I look at *The Trace of a Living Document*, an ash floor piece that uses ashes burned from the UDHR. This piece challenges the perceived veracity of the document, specifically one that fails to protect the subjects who it claims to defend. I observe this rendering of invisibility of ashes in contrast to the hypervisible emblems of nationhood and empire, such as the American bald eagle or Mexican golden eagle that Corral adopted into the site-specific installation *Unearthed: Desenterrado* installed at Rio Vista Farm, a former processing center for the Bracero Program. She presents these symbols on a white flag that eventually becomes tattered, a remnant of utopian universality, much like the UDHR. She

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<sup>10</sup> Elaine Scarry writes of the incommunicability of pain in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

calls attention to the values that these symbols perpetuate—in this case, the two myths of creation of neighboring countries—that rely on rendering some histories or groups invisible. I observe the two together to elucidate how the violence surrounding human rights abuses is not completely dissimilar to the way in which the US relies on immigrant bodies and their steady supply of cheap labor. Corral's treatment of the imagery calls into question, can hierarchies of violence exist? If human rights abuses have the potential to be taken to international courts, what does it mean for when brown bodies are subordinated, detained, and killed on a daily basis for the economic stability of a country whose foundation is promising liberty and freedom to all?

This thesis seeks to understand how images, histories, experiences of violence circulate within our visual culture. Corral's use of materiality reflects the complicated intertwining of terms that are traditionally polarizing, such as presence and absence, permanence and ephemerality, black and white. She does not define the thoughts, images, themes, or forms of representation that are concealed in these discourses. She does not seek a hidden discourse between the two. She activates ashes and soil, takes everyday materials—that have little use value and little to no market value, and are often discarded or repurposed—and converts them into art objects. The materials, for the most part, are immutable. Once ashes become ashes, they cannot take another form without a concerted effort. Dirt, if mixed with water, creates mud, and if heat is added, could become a ceramic. But that is not how Corral presents them: they are presented as raw material as a system of storage and retrieval through which we can understand the politics of history

and representation. Broken down into pieces, Corral detaches history and memory from the image that has been burdened to carry it for so long.

## Chapter 1: Reading Histories of Trauma through Abstraction

El Paso, Texas makes up the US half of the second largest binational metropolitan area along the US-Mexico border with Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua to its south. Ciudad Juárez is well known as one of the most dangerous cities in the world due to booming drug trade, high murder rate, police corruption, and a drastic increase in violence toward women and children.<sup>11</sup> Most of the time, we experience these horrors from some distance vis-à-vis a magazine, newspaper, or television set. This violence is often not our own, nor do we think it could be ours.<sup>12</sup> Citizens in border towns observe this violence from up close, yet they are separated by a wall, fence, or river; they remain close enough to witness fear and internalize the desire to take action. How can someone living in the borderlands be simultaneously immersed within and distanced from violence through the intertwined history of the two cities? I begin with these questions to understand whether

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<sup>11</sup> I note the geography of Corral's birthplace to better understand the ways in which a place and its inhabitant might affect the reading of an artwork. Since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect in 1994, disappearances and murders of women and children escalated in Ciudad Juarez. Although crime rates have gone down in recent years, 913 women have been reported murdered since 2010, and 3,000 women have gone missing since the mid-1990s. In 2017 alone, 86 femicides were reported, up 34% on 2016. Most cases remain unresolved.

<sup>12</sup> For an in depth look at the social history of human rights cases that Corral, alongside Honduran artist Alma Leiva, investigate in their work please see the exhibition catalog *Counter-archives to the narco city*, co-curated by Tatiana Reinoza and Luis Vargas-Santiago in 2015 Notre Dame's Snite Art Museum and Notre Dame's Center for Arts and Culture and San Antonio. Both artists in the exhibition explore the disappearances, kidnapping, and narco-violence along the US-Mexico border, the southern border of Mexico and Central America. The catalog includes entries by the two curators, as well as human rights lawyer Ariel Dulitzky, Clinical Professor of Law and Director of the Human Rights Clinic and Director of the Latin American Initiative at the University of Texas at Austin. Tatiana Reinoza and Luis Vargas-Santiago, eds., *Counter-archives to the narco-city*, trans. Raúl Ariza-Barile (n.p., 2015)

the positionality of the artist contributes to the notion of ethics of representation in visual culture. Is there a level of qualification or authenticity that one must perform to represent what has been deemed unrepresentable?

The body of Corral's work that I will explore in this chapter—abstract in their appearance as non-representational, non-figurative floor installations—contributes to an art historical tradition wherein humanitarian crises are treated and observed through the employment of geometric figures and abstraction.<sup>13</sup> This move toward the perceived universalism of non-figuration may be best expressed by an inability to represent loss, trauma, or the body in pain. The artists presented in this chapter—Corral, along with Teresa Margolles (b. 1963, Cualiacán, Mexico)—use non-figuration as a potential avenue through which to confront frightful patterns across centuries and cultures.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Margolles employs abstraction alongside tabloid journalism. Although this form of journalism highlights the body in pain, I would argue that these forms of representing the body abstracts them to the degree that they are unidentifiable as individual beings, and thus, abstracted. Observing Margolles' work in relation to Corral's may help shine a light on the ways in which different aesthetic forms circulate within our visual culture and the challenges of representation.

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<sup>13</sup> Here, I read abstraction as both abstracting language or the use of non-figuration to represent a human body. Vargas-Santiago reads Corral's practice to be in line with 1960s minimal sculpture—specifically Frank Stella, Sol LeWitt, Eva Hesse, or Kazimir Malevich. While this reading is present in the work, I would argue that it is most pertinent through the photographic reproductions wherein the installations read as purely geometric and even evocative of minimalist floor pieces. These photographic reproductions, however, do not account for the sensorial and material elements that are central to her practice: not only sight, but also sound, taste, smell, and touch. Reinoza and Vargas-Santiago, *Counter-archives to the narco-city*, 19-20.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).



Figure 3: Adriana Corral, *Sous Rature* “*Under Erasure*”, 2016. Site-specific installation at Artpace. UDHR recreated in soil and ash, steel, bullet resistant glass, and 4 x 8 x 6’ burial plot.

For both Corral and Margolles, the material serves as evidence of disappearance, when a mystery needs to be solved, or when something cannot be explained. Their use of materiality functions both as evidence of a person’s existence and as a way for the artists to represent another’s point of view that is not their own. Materiality, in combination with the use of abstraction provides an avenue through which the viewer can approach the difficult topic of grief. If the legacy of abstraction is designed to read as universalism—as there is the perception that abstraction or geometry comprise a shared visual language,



just as there is a shared language for human grief, “I understand what has happened” or “I bear witness to your pain”—then how do these forms and ideas they carry function in a museum space where the work is shown, or outside of the gallery where pain and grief are felt and performed? The aim of this chapter is twofold: 1) to observe how abstraction is used to make sense of systemic cultural and political violence, and 2) how non-figurative forms are employed to help us better understand, critique, and invert the ethics of representation within the predominantly patriarchal art historical canon, manifested in the exhibition space. I read this use of geometry and abstraction to discuss pain as similar to the way in which performative grief comes from a deep place of desire for connection, but perhaps looking differently than expected.

## **DECOLONIZING A CANON**

Since this postwar period, dissenting voices traditionally underrepresented within the field have reasserted visibility after being rendered invisible from mainstream postwar narratives. Corral and Margolles’ use of the language of abstraction—which dominated postwar art in the US as a symbol of capitalist and liberal democracy against the backdrop of the Cold War—aims to transform the dominant regimes of representation within the canon and its institutions. Within a predominantly patriarchal canon of art, women and artists of color, despite forming the demographic majority, have remained marginalized. This is especially heightened around groups that have come to represent

the postwar period in the American art historical canon: Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Minimal or Conceptual Art, which have remained highly visible within the academy, museum, and exhibition spaces. Postwar art in a reconstruction period confronted the question, what might global modernity look like and what methodologies might be employed? In the United States, the narrative put forth was one of white male power, a reflection of the demographic who controlled the state of world affairs. I note this not to suggest that Corral's or Margolles' practices should be read in terms of these movements; in other words, they are not relevant because of these histories, but rather, their work helps *shape* these histories. This can only be done when an art historian seeks to make the field a more equitable place, with the understanding that history is constantly in flux.

The invisibility of women artists within postwar art reflects who has access to the rights of representation, specifically those underrepresented within the canon and its institutions. How do oppressed groups assert their opacity in the art historical field that seeks to render them invisible? Abstract forms may offer a way for Corral and Margolles to contest marginalization from within the canon itself. The work of both Corral and Margolles raises the following questions: how is empathy represented in visual culture? How might the language of abstraction allow for the viewer to gain the ability to understand feelings of another? What level of visual literacy is required to approach the artworks and who has access to said literacy? Margolles, Corral, and many others face the challenge of how to represent, memorialize, and pay respect to those disappeared, lost, or otherwise gone. The use of non-figuration and abstraction is not appropriation or

derivation, but rather a form of activism within conservative, mainstream art historical discourses.

### ABSTRACTING LANGUAGE

The raw material of ash is presented as a metaphor of social and historical erasure, while the tidy, precise lines provide an avenue through which Corral attempts to organize utter chaos. It is only when the viewer crouches down to the floor or squints defiantly at a gallery wall that they too can attempt to identify the work's true disarray.



Figure 4: Corral, *Memento*, 2013. Female victim names transferred onto walls: acetone, ash burial plot (4'x8'x1"). Ashes obtained from burned name listings transferred onto wall

This level of recognition comes without being able to identify from where exactly the chaos stems. Stripping an object of its identifiable qualities leaves space for ambiguity, rather than specificity, on the part of the viewer. For *Memento*, Corral lays a 4 x 8' burial plot made of ashes—obtained from listing of victims' names—alongside the names of female homicide victims from Juárez transferred onto the gallery wall.

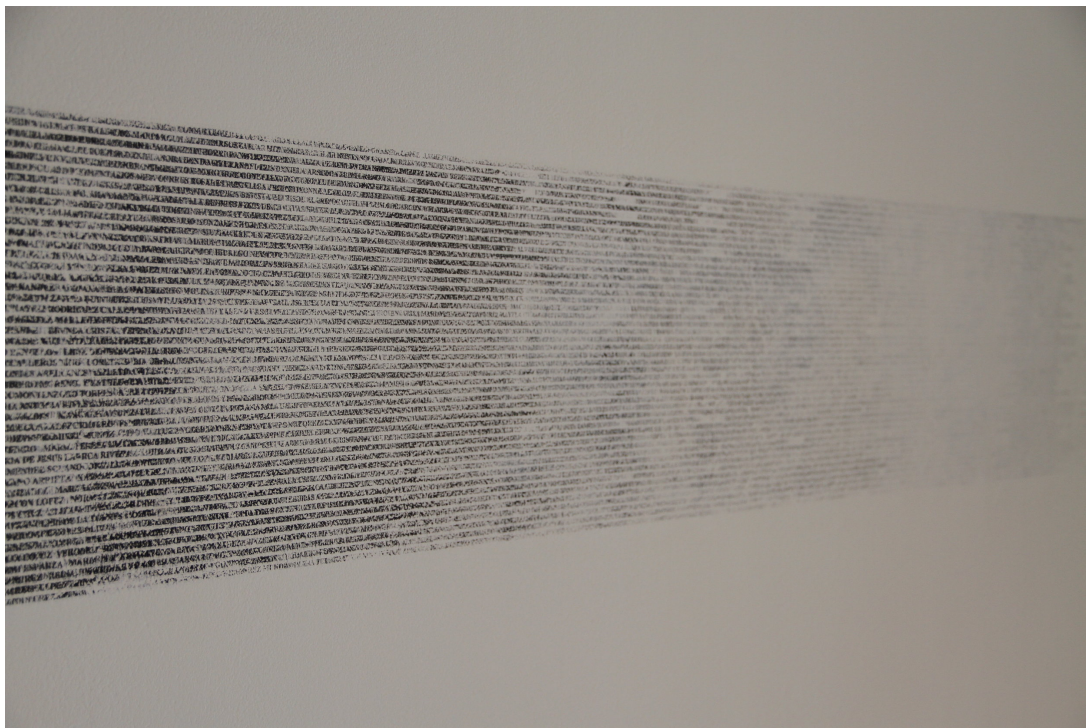


Figure 5: Detail of *Memento*.

The material of the art object has been burned by Corral herself; or rather, she ignites the flame that then burns the documents. Before the reader can encounter the

object, Corral must collect the documents that she wishes to burn and either print them, or re-write them in her own handwriting, to then be incinerated and reduced to ashes—a material that is extremely difficult to handle, even after it is mixed with gypsum or other forms of binding elements. She uses a blow torch to incinerate trash cans full of documents while she stands at a distance wearing a respirator mask to protect herself from any noxious fumes, the heat or other forms of potential destruction from the fire. This element of performance is not shown in the final product of the work but is a critical component to Corral's practice: it involves an element of stamina by putting herself into bodily danger. The installation process itself is a test of endurance, much in line with 1960s and 1970s performance art that emphasized actions with the body. By inserting her on body into harm's way to produce the artworks, Corral performs the violence that is inflicted on victims of erasure. This performative work, however, becomes invisible in the final product just as the representations of the bodies of those disappeared are erased—the figures invisible in the final work—reflecting the systemic apparatus of historical erasure.

On the wall, the ashes fade in and out of a hard-edged black to lighter shades of gray as the ashes wear out as Corral transfers the document back and forth onto the wall. She repeats this process over and over again, creating an oscillation between varying shades of light and dark of the names; she does this around all three of the gallery walls, ultimately encapsulating the viewer. The viewer looks to read names that but is met with frustration with the flickering of text and the lack of clarity. The names cannot be read, for they are rendered completely illegible.

Although they fade, the list of names becomes a memorial to the lives lost. The truth is obscured as names are affirmed and negated at the same time. They are there, but they are not there in the way that we want them to be. The ambiguity of the narrative of those who are disappeared is repeated in Corral's method. Names blur together, illegibly layered atop of one another. Without proper investigation into murders and disappearances, an air of the unknown plagues the families of victims. Families come together to solve the murders themselves, piecing together bits of the puzzle. They reach to the objects—the mementos—of the disappeared in case they come back, or at least to not to forget them. The objects serve as a reminder of what has been lost. We, the viewers, define ourselves through our distance to the text—the names of victims and ultimately, the victims themselves—because we cannot read the names on the wall; we do not know them nor will we ever. The illegibility of language is expressed most clearly as palimpsests upon each other.

Not only are ashes a fuzzy medium with which to write, lending itself to smudging, decay, and disappearance, but also the names are layered atop of one another, making them illegible to the viewer, rendering the names of victims nearly anonymous. What should be a neat and orderly list—as a memorial or obituary might—is instead presented as a horizontal plane that reads more like a steady stream of data, a cascade of facts and figures in which only the facts are obscured. Names once originally attached to identities become statistics that cannot be made sense of. The viewer may expect to read a clear listing of names, perhaps alphabetically, as if one might at the at a memorial site

where names of victims are clearly separate and individualized; perhaps a name or two may be recognizable, but most often they are not.

Corral, through the technique of palimpsest, makes visible the original traces of the names, but the earlier forms are effaced through the layering of additional names.

There are ultimately too many victims to create something neat and orderly; the only productive method of communication is to lay them on top of one another, mimicking the way in which bodies are buried in mass graves. The names are hidden and revealed at the same time through the many layers of information.<sup>15</sup> The fleeting nature of the medium, how the names are presented, reflects the ways in which information passes through our memory, sinking into deeper layers of our unconscious selves.<sup>16</sup> There is some confusion as to what might have happened to these women or who they were, even to those who knew them. How do we remember the people we cannot bear to forget? People we didn't know, or who we did, but only through the objects that they held—the mementos—we

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida says "Writing supplements perception before perception even appears to itself.", *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 224.

<sup>16</sup> Freud notes the shortcomings of the technique of writing as a tool for remembering. If notebooks are "devices to aid our memory [they] seem particularly imperfect, since our mental apparatus accomplishes precisely what they cannot: it has an unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent—even though not unalterable—memory-traces of them." The nature of memory is that they change every time we access them. In contrast to writing, which is our attempt to make ephemeral thoughts concrete with words. This mystical tab is a children's toy: it is not a piece of paper, but a slab of dark brown resin or wax with a transparent sheet overlaid on top. One would mark upon the sheet covering the wax, in doing so making scratches upon the surface. The mark made through the covering sheet and onto the wax pad creates a slight groove. To erase the marks, one would raise the covering sheet from the wax slab. Previous traces made upon the sheet remain legible. Freud extends this theory of the pad to compare it to the perceptual apparatus of the mind. Relating our perceptual system to what Freud puts forth in the mystic pad, we may be able to deconstruct the layers of names in *Memento*. Sigmund Freud, "A note upon the 'Mystic writing-pad'" (1925) in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997), 208.

might remember who they were. But as we gain distance from them, our memory fades and becomes an abstraction of itself.

## Visual Literacy and Liminality

The physical act of erasure gives the impression of a blank slate, but upon closer inspection it is not really so.<sup>17</sup> Within the gallery space, geometric forms as plots of ash evoke a sense of liminality, a place of in between or of a passage, much like that of the US-Mexico border threshold, or perhaps into another social, cultural, or after-life.

Although, exactly *whose* passage it is comes into question. In “The art museum as ritual,” Carol Duncan states,

To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community's highest values and most authoritative truths. It is also the power to

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<sup>17</sup> There are many forms of erasure present in Corral's work—the one I am discussing now is the physical act of erasure to produce a finished artwork. *Erased de Kooning Drawing* from 1953 by Robert Rauschenberg took a de Kooning drawing to discover if a work of art could be created entirely through erasure, focusing on the removal of marks rather than the layering buildup of them. To no surprise, Rauschenberg did not want to erase his own drawings, instead approaching Willem de Kooning, an already established artist under whose influence Rauschenberg may have been working. De Kooning agreed, albeit reluctantly. For Rauschenberg, the act of erasure was a declaration “here I'm not,” rather than “here I am.” While the traces of de Kooning remained only slightly visible, the figuration of the original drawing disappeared. The preserved trace is partial. What the original de Kooning looked like is unknown, but perhaps hinted at (there is a faint trace of a woman's figure in the lower left corner. “Erased de Kooning” was produced around the same time that de Kooning was heavily involved in his *Woman* series, between 1950 and 1955). We are left not with a tabula rasa, but the erasure of a master's work in an act of homage, destruction, humor, or patricide—indeed we could color the list of Rauschenberg's intentions in many ways. Through erasure, Rauschenberg preserved de Kooning's drawing in its material form. The original thought was repressed, as though entering from conscious thought into the unconscious mind. It is there, but just barely.



define the relative standing of individuals within that community. Those who are best prepared to perform its ritual—those who are most able to respond to its various cues—are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, or ethnic) the museum ritual most fully confirms.<sup>18</sup>

This reading situates exhibition spaces as not only spaces that reflect the class, race, and gender of those they choose to represent, but, by doing so, also function as structures that reinforce and maintain systems of power through the objects that are shown or how they are presented (i.e. chronological, geographical, or by gender, ethnicity, race). Duncan argues that the museological framework—within gallery walls that acknowledges a peculiar kind of “taste,” and thus viewers as tastemakers—assigns a certain kind of value and gives meaning to the individual objects themselves.<sup>19</sup>

Can this framework be applied to the production of artworks themselves? What—and whose—mode of production has been confirmed by the museum ritual? I posed the question earlier in the chapter: how do oppressed groups assert their opacity in the art historical field that seeks to render them invisible? Corral’s use of geometry, in this instance, may be a way in which to do so. Just as a museum provides a frame that assigns meaning to certain objects, it steers the viewer to observe particular readings of an object, albeit through wall didactics or the curation itself. Margaret Olin reflects on Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” to observe the standards and values inherited from the past

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<sup>18</sup> Carol Duncan, "The art museum as ritual," *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (March 1995), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

and placed on the artwork in the present, contributing to elitism and even voyeurism within an exhibition space,

[Fried] criticized then current “minimal” sculpture’ as “literalist,” comparing its relationship with its beholder unfavorably with modernist painting, characterized as ‘important,’ ‘ambitious,’ or ‘high.’ Literalist art was concerned with the circumstances of the beholder’s encounter with the work. A work would confront the beholder, making the beholder responsible for the effect of the work, the act of looking and being seen becoming the subject of the work. This dependence on the beholder for its effect, however, gave the work the inauthenticity associated with acting for an audience as in theater.... We are inauthentic, watched and watching, most of the time.<sup>20</sup>

I believe reading Corral’s work through the lens of abstraction is not to do so to create a relationship with modernism as “important” or “high” art, as Fried suggests, but to reflect on the very mechanisms from which this reading may take place and why.<sup>21</sup> The gaze, then, functions not only from the viewer to the object, but is reciprocated by the object to the viewer in the form of affect and self-reflection, although it may be disguised under the veil of modernism or abstraction. The expectation of visual literacy to approach the

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<sup>20</sup> Margaret Olin, gaze to *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, second ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), [Page 321].

<sup>21</sup> In discussing the production of public knowledge vis-a-vis television, newspaper, or magazine photo editors, Susan Sontag states, “often their decisions are cast as judgments about ‘good taste’—always a repressive standard when invoked by institutions. Staying within the bounds of good taste was the primary reason given for not showing any of the horrific pictures of the dead taken at the site of the World Trade Center in the immediate aftermath of the attack on September 11, 2001.” *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 68.

work, or even, in the case of museums with admission fees, a certain level of economic stability to enter the gallery space contributes to the museological elitist construction.

Corral and Margolles' work contributes to histories of abstraction and performance, the politics of representation, and facing the ethics of representing the unrepresentable. Reflecting on Duncan's idea of treating the museum as a ritual artifact, Corral's ash floor pieces create a liminal space. The burial-size plots invoke a certain kind of watching on the part of the viewer: he or she contemplatively walks around burial-sized ash plots on the ground, or in some cases, excavations of the gallery floor, as though partaking in a procession or observing a ceremonial monument.<sup>22</sup> The burial plot sized floor piece evokes a human body—indeed, its disappearance—and the placement of the ashes on the floor requires the viewer to look down or crouch to the ground to view the piece, placing the viewer into a performative and ritual viewing experience. The secular institution is transformed into a memorial for the lives lost, “as ritual sites [visitors] seek to relive spiritually significant moments of the past, [and] art museums

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<sup>22</sup> Pierra Nora looks at the spaces that dominate the spaces between memory and history, “The first, spectacular and triumphant, imposing and generally, imposed—either by a national authority or by an established interest, but always from above—characteristically have the coldness and solemnity of official ceremonies. One attends them rather than visits them. The second are places of refuge, sanctuaries of spontaneous devotion and silent pilgrimage, where one finds the living heart of memory.... There is a differentiated network to which all of these separate identities belong, an unconscious organization of collective memory that it is our responsibility to bring to consciousness.” Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History : Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 23.

make splendid examples of this kind of symbolic strategy.”<sup>23</sup> Form and material are used to critique the ways in which we are trained to see or experience an artwork.<sup>24</sup>

For *Sous Rature* “*Under Erasure*”, Corral presents soil, ash, and steel, bullet/bomb resistant glass alongside a 4 x 8 x 6’ burial plot, excavated from the gallery floor.<sup>25</sup> The physical erasure through the exhumation creates a lacuna for which to be filled. She created a gaping hole in the middle of the white cube where an excavated burial is not an everyday sighting, only if we are at a funeral, or a grave looting. In the viewing of an empty grave, the absence of a human body is almost alarming.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Carol Duncan, “The art museum as ritual”, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Corral was included in the group exhibition *Names Printed in Black*, which was on view at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) from January 3 - February 11, 2018. At the opening of the exhibition, a woman walked through the ash floor piece entitled “Traces of a Living Document,” and later stated that she believed that to be the intention of the artwork. She understood the floor piece to be interactive, as though the placement of it asked for the viewer’s participation. If the woman viewed the piece having a visual literacy of abstraction and minimalism, wherein mechanical and machine-made materials are often used, allowing (even telling) the viewer to interact with the work by stepping on it, then this action would be appropriate. But not everybody had this reading—her own visual literacy of the artwork was informed by her past knowledge of art world mechanics. The material of ash disrupted what might be expected of this viewing experience. It is not lead or concrete, but the material is soft, even delicate. Indeed, some of the piece likely went home on the shoe of the woman who walked through it.

<sup>25</sup> “*Sous rature*” or “under erasure,” a philosophical device developed by Martin Heidegger, refers to the act of striking through a word within a text, but allowing the word to remain legible. In doing so, Heidegger shows us the limits of language and our system of signifiers or when a word is inaccurate, yet necessary. Sometimes there is no better word to fit the meaning that we are trying to convey, and we are at the mercy of these linguistic limitations. The meaning of the word to which *sous rature* is applied is then derived from difference—what is not, rather than what is. It accounts for something that is lacking, an absence that stems from the act of repression, in the way that the unconsciously situated subject is constituted through its detachment of the thing from the other.

<sup>26</sup> Please see Figure 3 on page 28.



Figure 6: Detail of *Sous Rature*, 4 x 8 x 6' burial plot. Photo by Adam Schreiber.



Figure 7: Detail of *Sous Rature*. Photo by Adam Schreiber.

As a viewer, we rarely see what lies beneath the gallery floor, what comprises the white cube that we stand on top of. When we look down, seeing the depth of a grave with no indication of a human life (or death) is unsettling, perhaps vertigo inducing. The body we might expect to see is not there. The hole feels as if it is waiting to be filled by something or someone. The evocation of the absence, or lacuna, presents an analytical strategy in which to mark the presence of absence. The burial is placed next to bullet and bomb proof glass, alongside recreations of the eight pages of the English version of the UDHR, represented by eight tablets in the piece. Four of the tablets use soil and gypsum, the other four use ash and gypsum: the combination of raw material with gypsum emulsify to create the hardened tablet and indented letters on the document's surface.



Figure 8: UDHR tablets in *Sous Rature*

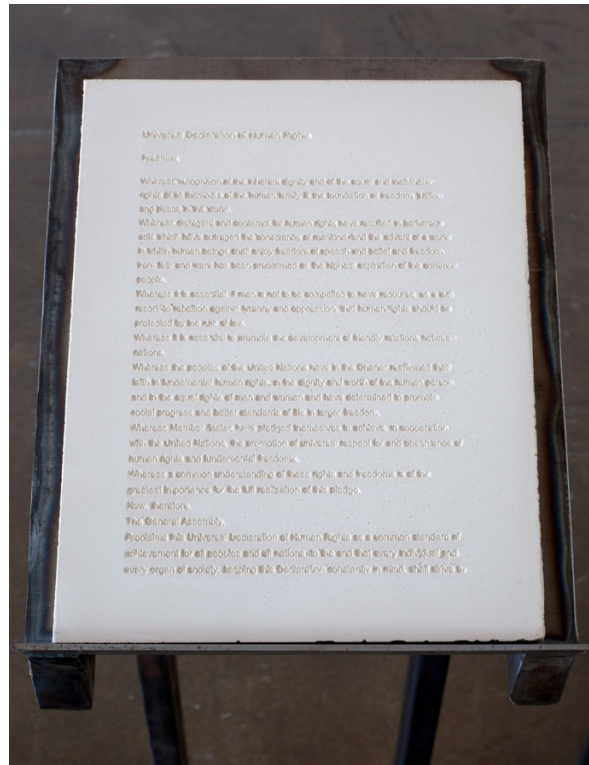


Figure 9: Page from UDHR; ash and gypsum tablet, ashes burned from UDHR

With soil and ash as her primary materials, Corral includes bullet- and bomb-proof glass along with this installation. The material of glass is derived from sand—made from heating regular sand to liquefy it—the triad of materials—soil, ash, glass, sand—connects land, body, and defense tool as interrelated and interdependent parts. The body is erased, preserved in soil, and at times, protected by the bulletproof glass.

Elaine Scarry notes in *The Body in Pain* that pain cannot be expressed by anything other than something so guttural or instinctual like a primal scream; there is no language to describe what pain feels like.<sup>27</sup> If that is the case, then how are visual artists

<sup>27</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 1985.



challenged to represent the very same sensation and what histories do they tap into to create it? The UDHR was created by the UN to cope with traumas from war but is yet another imperfect example of postwar utopian ideals. In a society that is inundated with images of people mourning the loss of loved ones, bodies collapsed at the frontlines of war, or migrants found washed up on a shoreline or masses buried in unmarked graves—or even the sensationalism of crime vis-a-vis various media and journalism outlets—visual artists are challenged with how to address the ethics of representation in visual culture.

### **Reading the Body in Pain**

In “Regarding the Pain of Others,” Susan Sontag argues that one of the discerning features of modern life is that it presents us with numerous possibilities to observe, from a distance, violence that takes place throughout the world. The images that communicate such horrors have become so commonplace that viewers have gained a level of apathy towards them. The book looks to photography as a medium to depict pain—although the only image the book shows is from Goya’s Disasters of War series—and how the proliferation of the medium has trained an apathetic viewer.<sup>28</sup> Sontag uses examples ranging from photographic documents of the American Civil War, lynchings of blacks in the South, the First World War, the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi death camps, to Goya

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<sup>28</sup> Goya’s depiction to the dehumanizing destruction of war is in stark contrast to his peers who depicted war as an act of heroism.

and then to contemporary images from Israel, Palestine, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, and New York City on September 11, 2001. The distance Sontag discusses relies on a specific positionality of the viewer of violence, wherein the victims of atrocity and massacre are most often not people the viewer may know. The assumed audience that Sontag assumes may be no different than that of a museum-goer, Corral making her work, or even myself writing this text.

In her practice, Margolles—a Mexican photographer, videographer, conceptual and performance artist, and previously a morgue employee in Mexico City—investigates the social and political causes and consequences of death and how burials reflect class relations.<sup>29</sup> Holding a degree in science of communication and forensic medicine from Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City. Margolles marks absence of the body to expose conditions of anonymity, indeterminacy, and the consequences of emotional distress. Her body of work includes both vulgar representations of violence as well as a more pared down conceptual framework, wherein she employs the use of concrete or architectural remains to understand poverty and violence through material remains of the deceased.

She employs materials taken directly from the morgue: water used to wash corpses before an autopsy, blood-stained sheets from corpses, body fat as the materials to create artwork. The material follows the deceased body into the afterlife—not necessarily the remains of bodies, but rather its physical and cultural transformation—not

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<sup>29</sup> Margolles' bio can be found at <https://www.labor.org.mx/en/artists/teresa-margolles/>

as an anthropological dig unearthing the victims, but rather to reveal traces of life behind violent acts. For *Papeles (Papers)* from 2004, the artist includes sheets of watercolor paper that she soaked in water that had previously been used to wash corpses after autopsy, each sheet absorbing the blood and fat from the bodies. The sheets of paper are arranged in rows stacked on top of each other in a manner reminiscent of salon hang of portraiture or mimicking the arrangement of cold chambers within the morgue. The objects themselves do not represent the individual body or identity of the person who it belonged to—the material quality of the bodies, flesh and bone, is absent—but she chooses to represent their abstraction as such. In this case, it is forensic evidence.

In addition to her work from within the morgue in Mexico City, Margolles looks at the border city, Ciudad Juarez, as a place of promise for migrants seeking opportunity and work. Instead of the promise of freedom, they are met with violence, economic instability, and high unemployment rates, causing the migrants to flee or get killed, adding another layer of displacement. This sense is reflected in the empty houses and subdivisions.<sup>30</sup> *La Promesa (The Promise)* emerged from this: for this project, Margolles dismantled an abandoned low-income house in Juarez, sent the remains to Mexico City for it to be milled into tiny pieces. The piece is activated by a group of people who helped

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<sup>30</sup> Since 2007, about 160,000 Mexicans have fled their homes as a result of the violence. In 2012, this was represented in over 115,000 empty homes in Ciudad Juarez in suburban neighborhoods and residential developments.

cover the surface of the exhibition space with the building's remnants.



Figure 10: Teresa Margolles, *La Promesa (The Promise)*, 2012-13. Remains of a demolished house from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Collection Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), UNAM, Mexico.

Here, the empty architectural structure stands in for the body fleeing from violence or one whose disappearance was a direct result of that violence; the destruction of it represents the afterlife of the individual or family who may have inhabited the structure. Over a six-month period from February until June of 2012, an archive was created surrounding the piece, including videos, photographs, texts, and newspapers from the city (El Disario, El Mexicano, PM, and El Norte).

In contrast to her use of abstracting the body, Margolles also incorporates sensational tabloid journalism into her practice, which shows the bodies of the victims of violence next to hyper-sexualized depictions of women. The bodies of the victims are often unrecognizable, rendered as faceless and anonymous. For *PM 2010* (2012), she collected 313 front pages of the Mexican evening newspaper *PM*, published in Ciudad Juarez, which is published daily Monday through Saturday. It is readily available to those who have access to the print run of the tabloid: it is both exclusive but also widely available. With no online edition available and the past issues recycled every three months, the lifespan of the magazine is ephemeral.



Figure 11: Margolles, *PM 2010*, 2012. Installation, 313 images of covers of the newspaper *PM* from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, published in 2010: each 37.2 x 32 x 2 cm, framed.

The victims shown on the cover are faceless; the magazine editors choose to forefront the gruesomeness of death (and also sexualize women's bodies) to increase potential sales. Sontag states, "for a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war."<sup>31</sup> We, as consumers of visual and print culture, are inundated by this kind of information: photographs depicting horrors to the point that they may no longer be shocking.

This type of journalism interrogates the growing fetishization of crime journalism as a spectacle designed to sell a product, but it may have originated as a tool to make the viewer suffer when he or she views the work. The images simultaneously shock and become clichés as the two notions become intrinsically linked. In contrast to Margolles and Corral's abstract representations of violence, interpreting a photograph may be more accessible to the untrained art viewer by the sheer fact that these types of images are so widely circulated (although, geometric forms are argued to be universal in their representations, but perhaps legibility shifts within the space of a white cube).<sup>32</sup> A different form of visual literacy is employed: the images from the tabloids are familiar, while at the same time they may not be exact images we've seen before. We have become all too accustomed to the photographic genre that it cannot possibly make us suffer enough when we view them. Margolles employs the tabloid as a tool to highlight

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<sup>31</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. [Page 14]

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. [Page 28]

not only the voyeuristic tendencies of the reader, but perhaps when it is viewed from within the exhibition space, the art viewer is reminded of his or her own voyeurism.

The works that Corral and Margolles brought into and framed within an exhibition space do not repair a viewer's ignorance to histories or systems of domination that cause suffering. Duncan poses the problem that there is no ideal museum visitor: "the hypothetical individual who is perfectly predisposed socially, psychologically, and culturally to enact the museum ritual" does not exist.<sup>33</sup> The ritual framework of the museum is utilized to ask the viewer to reflect and maybe even to unlearn rationalizations of distant horrors presented by established powers. The artists employ recognizable forms—whether it be geometry, dirt and debris, or images pulled from mass media—as an invitation to pay attention to mass sufferings that have become mundane to the faraway spectator. And in doing so, the artists criticize that there is an ongoing and fervent concern with representability.

But who is the intended audience for these works or tabloids such as PM? One is encountered within the walls of an art museum, while the latter is consumed daily by someone living in close proximity to someone that is living in fear (or perhaps they themselves live in fear) or it is someone that is inflicting that fear onto another. But criticizing representation does not solve any problems. We, the spectator, can divert our eyes from a photograph or a wall didactic, can turn off the television or the podcast, or flip to the next section of a newspaper. We might not be completely changed viewing

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<sup>33</sup> Carol Duncan, "The art museum as ritual." [Page 10].

these works, but if we take the museum ritual seriously, in whatever way that may mean to us, perhaps we observe why or why not this is the case.



## Chapter 2: Ephemerality and Permanence, The Production and Circulation of Cultural Memory

Corral's artistic practice grapples with histories that are a threat to and that are threatened by erasure. This chapter will consider works by Corral that challenge the perceived permanence of historical narratives by blurring the lines between visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility. I will look at two recent projects of Corral's that confront the assumed veracity of documents and monuments through her exploration of ephemerality and stability.<sup>34</sup> The first is an ash floor piece, entitled *The Trace of a Living Document*, that employs non-figuration to communicate the inexpressibility of a body in pain—the second, entitled *Unearthed: Desenterrado*, is a site-specific installation at a former processing center for the Bracero Program.<sup>35</sup> The former complicates how abstracting documents intended to protect victims of genocide, femicide, or other forms

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<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault discusses “values of truth” in relation to the “domain of fictitious objects, endowed with arbitrary properties, without any authority of experimental or perceptive verification” : which are linked “to laws of possibility, rules of existence for the objects that are named, designated, or described within it, or for the relations that are affirmed or denied in [the statement].” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 91.

<sup>35</sup> In April 2019, an exhibition catalog was released by Washington and Lee's Staniar Gallery in Lexington, Virginia. The exhibition ran from April 22-May 24, 2019 and it is the first place where the flag has been seen outside of Rio Vista Farm. The catalogue includes essays by curators, historians, and art historians, including an oral history of a former bracero, Felipe Serrano, conducted by Yolanda Chavez Leyva, Director of the Institute of Oral History and the Borderlands Public History Lab and associate professor at the University of Texas at El Paso. Other contributors include: Andrea Lepage, Denise Markonish, David Dorado Romo, and Cortney Lane Stell. The catalogue offers a comprehensive review of the piece across disciplines. For more information, please visit <https://www.wlu.edu/staniar-gallery/current-season/adriana-corral>. Andrea Lepage, ed., *Unearthed: Desenterrado, Adriana Corral* (Lexington, VA: Washington and Lee, Staniar Gallery, 2019).

of state-sponsored violence critically distances the viewer from the very violence that was enacted in the first place, as was discussed in the previous chapter.



Figure 12: Corral *Unearthed: Desenterrado*, 2018. Site-specific installation at the Historical Rio Vista Farm.

The latter, a white flag embroidered with the American bald eagle and the Mexican golden eagle—the national birds of the two countries—exposes the emblems of nationhood that the US relies on to assert and maintain hemispheric and global empire

both domestically and abroad.<sup>36</sup> Observing the material that is self-erasing—wherein the document stands in for the human body—alongside the monumental flag representing the origin myths of two neighboring countries exposes the hierarchical mechanisms of erasure that are hidden in plain sight.

Corral calls attention to these symbols that permeate our cultural landscape and that, in their hypervisibility, are internalized within the individual and collective consciousness.<sup>37</sup> She investigates the physical, material circumstances of memory through her ephemeral and performative site installations by using erasure not only as an aesthetic device, but also a method of production. Ashes persist beyond the original act of destruction, and while the emblems of nationhood are seen as permanent, they only seem so within contemporaneity. The relationship between these symbols and the histories they obfuscate, or render invisible, is complex. In this chapter I intend to present the objects as foils of one another: the ash floor pieces are nearly invisible, abstracted, and perhaps easy to look away from or forget, and the other that is highly visible that it has become engrained into our collective memory. How might observing the two together help us better understand how to emerge from erasure? By reenacting and appropriating the violence of erasure, and the emblems that make them so, Corral's aesthetic practice

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<sup>36</sup> Benedict Anderson provides a comprehensive global interpretation of nationalism in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

<sup>37</sup> In *On Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs explores the crossover of memory, history, and the lived experience and how their relationships to class and race are intertwined. 1925. Translated and introduced by Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

reflects and inverts the very social and political structures that perpetuate historical erasure.

Erasure can be understood as a forceful elimination or destruction of content by means of removal, perhaps with the goal that no trace will be left behind. It can manifest itself in many ways: censorship, effacement, exclusion, or rejection through acts such as elimination of histories from textbooks, the toppling of monuments, replacement of political structures, or the destruction of cultural artifacts. The main goal is to enact forgetting, the most opportunistic tactic of erasure. The violence of erasure becomes palpable not only for the communities that bear it, but also those who inflict it onto others. But more than any other persons or demographic, the threat of erasure relentlessly haunts minorities—women, people of color, non-binary conforming peoples, etc.—whose existence is seen as less than valuable or readily replaced.

## **MEMORY SHAPED BY A DOCUMENT**

In the United States, ethnic and racial minorities carry their individual and cultural memories but possess little to no historical capital. Discovering a buried past is made all the more difficult for communities who have been marked for disappearance and who have been hidden from our cultural memory. Memory can be an archival and

political project, a vigilant attempt to maintain a collective memory and heritage. Without such vigilance, the speed of history threatens to sweep their stories away.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 13: Corral, *The Trace of a Living Document*, 2017. Site-specific installation, (8) 4 x 8' sifted ash burial plots. Ashes obtained from documents of the UDHR.

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<sup>38</sup> Pierre Nora calls this the “acceleration of history,” which “confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory—social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies—and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past.... This conquest and eradication of memory by history has had the effect of a revelation, as if an ancient bond of identity had been broken and something had ended that we had experienced as self-evident—the equation of memory and history.” Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 8.

For *The Trace of a Living Document*, Corral takes ashes burned from the UDHR, an international document adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948. The eight page document outlines basic rights and fundamental freedoms to which all human beings are entitled in an effort to shape new national, and even international, identity by attempting to develop a universal moral standard.<sup>39</sup> This document was created after World War II as a kind of reconstruction of collective memory as a means to cope with horrors of the present, horrors that were experienced globally. The document symbolizes the creation of a postwar utopian moral bottom line (whose erosion coincides with 1970s neoliberalism) to ensure that those oppressed would be protected from their oppressors.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the document serves as a consciously organized—and largely utopian—form of cultural memory. The document stands in to *produce* history, rather than one that reflects natural histories or natural memory. This document in particular is one that is rooted in moral uniformity and the championing of democratic freedom at the onset of Cold War politics. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt elaborated on what convinces the masses: it is not fact, but repetition and consistency. Making fiction becomes a powerful tool in the production of ideological content:

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<sup>39</sup> The text and of UDHR can be accessed online at <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>, available to anyone with an internet connection.

<sup>40</sup> The exhibition “Postwar: art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965,” examined the first 20 years following the end of World War II, observing how artists responded to the traumas of the Holocaust, atomic bombings; how the two political blocs of the Cold War used abstraction and realism as tools for propaganda; the end of European colonial systems and decolonialization, civil rights movements in the United States, etc. For more, please see: Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes, eds., *Postwar: art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*, english ed. (Munich; New York: Haus der Kunst, Prestel, 2016).

In an ever-changing, incomprehensible world the masses had reached the point where they would, at the same time, believe everything and nothing, think that everything was possible and nothing was true....Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow.<sup>41</sup>

Over the seventy years since the document has been put into effect, it has become evident that this document is unrealistic in its utopian worldview, one wherein all human beings are universally protected by international law. The words of this document lose meaning as we learn that other forms of politics are working in tandem with and against international human rights law.

Corral's conception of *The Trace of a Living Document* came after her time spent at the 106th private session on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearance cases at the UN, wherein she was able to observe court proceedings and had access to confidential documents from Campo Algodonero, the Cotton Field Case.<sup>42</sup> This case was taken to the courts in 2009, eight years after the bodies of three women were found in a cotton field just outside of Ciudad Juárez. The case, Campo Algodonero vs. Mexico, concluded that the state of Chihuahua failed to protect the victims in spite of full awareness of the existence of a pattern of gender-related violence that had resulted in the murders of

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<sup>41</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1951), 382.

<sup>42</sup> Email with artist on March 4, 2019.

hundreds of women and girls. Cases such as these underscore the failure of postwar policies—and moreover, the dangers in idealizing the document—to protect against state-sponsored and gang-related violence.

The document is to be understood as a way in which culture tries to make sense of history—including understanding traumas from wars that are enacted by the same governments who produce documents—because there is the widespread belief that history can consolidate itself into one narrative document. Corral addresses what we do when history doesn't give us what we want. The role that visibility of histories, images, and national emblems play influence our individual and national identity, which inevitably informs our ways of remembering. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag states, “perhaps too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking. Remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead.”<sup>43</sup> In this case, confronting the ghosts of history through the document or the grand historical fact that points to the document as a solution at the end of a straight line is, after all, not any solution at all, but rather one that asks us to see the disappeared through their own apparitions.<sup>44</sup>

Corral's burning of documents stems from both a sense of frustration, but also the long history of censorship as a form of oppression. Occasionally states are sued for failing to properly investigate a case, although often times they are not, and many cases

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<sup>43</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 115.

<sup>44</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008)



don't make it to the courts to begin with. The cases that Corral observed from Chihuahua, Mexico represented only a small fraction of the hundreds of victims of disappearance in Latin America—thousands if we count those who are lost on their way to North America in a stream of enforced international trade of human property that is reinforced by US foreign policy in the region.

The English version of the UDHR is eight pages long; for each page of the document, Corral maps out eight 4 x 8' burial sized plots on the floor about a foot apart from one another (in the background you can see series of ash panels created with the same ashes). In preparation for installation, Corral wears kneepads, an apron, and a respirator mask so as not to breathe in or blow away the artwork. The image of Corral as a masked figure is not only practical or even precautionary but proposes a different relationship between artist and artwork: it is not only performative, but it also has medical connotations as if the artist might believe the material to be potentially harmful.

This relationship is not dissimilar from the fear of foreign bodies often backed by racialized medicine as a form of gatekeeping or defense of eugenics within the borderlands.<sup>45</sup> As she sifts, she crouches down and tiptoes along the brown builder's paper so not to disturb the placement of the ashes beneath her. She repeats this across the eight burial plots: it is a test of endurance, balance, and stability. Once the piece is fully installed, what is left is a precarious installation about one millimeter high that could at

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<sup>45</sup> This act is not only performative, but it is also a response to what we read in the National Archives. The medical discourse around the immigrant body (in the case of a typhus scare) is that they were carrying invisible killers. Thus, immigrant bodies were sprayed with DDT to rid them of any sign of lice. DDT is another silent killer. Corral's performance here, only seen by the curator and art handlers during installation, evokes this history.

any moment be blown away by something as modest as a gust from air conditioning or the misstep of the artist herself.



Figure 14: Detail of *The Trace of a Living Document*.

Corral says that her practice is about the trace: the ashes that are left behind that seep into the cracks on the gallery floor, what sticks to the broom that sweeps the piece up, or the ashes she transfers onto walls that are painted over for the next installation. This investigation reflects how certain bodies that enter visual circulation can just as quickly disappear and can continue to haunt us. Although the freshly painted gallery gives the appearance of a blank slate, her practice pushes the notion that this is only a

facade. It is through her display of censorship and destruction that the apparitional and disappeared can become visible so that we can recognize what has been attempted to be made invisible, but can never fully be so.

Her ash installations function as a symptom of what has gone missing through enacting the very violence of erasure in a highly abstracted way. The ambiguity of geometric, non-figurative forms reflects the faceless and anonymous bodies to whom the UDHR is intended to protect but often fails to do so. She avoids sensationalizing the victims of violence by leaving out the names, faces, or any inkling of specificity, instead we are left to face the crippling sense of “universality” that the UDHR promotes.<sup>46</sup> Thus we, the viewers, are positioned by a comfortable distance to the violence itself even while we observe the remnants of destruction. Corral asks us to give practical consideration to disappearance, censorship, and exile, to understand that we too could be at risk of becoming the very thing that we are looking at: erased.

The burning of this document is fueled by a sense of unrest. Stories of disappearances range from fictional to the official document, lying in layers upon each other. If the document is to be understood as a way in which culture tries to make sense of history—including understanding traumas from war—through the belief that history can consolidate itself into one narrative document, how do we confront terrible deeds that

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<sup>46</sup> Corral’s conception of the piece came after her time spent at the 106th private session on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearance cases at the United Nations, wherein she was able to observe court proceedings. With the help of Ariel Dulitzky, the Chair of the Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearance cases, Corral was able to obtain confidential documents to the court proceedings from the Cotton Field Case, Campo Algodonero, which were used in the InterAmerican Courts of Human Rights in Chile.

are systematically occurring in the present? In this case, confronting the ghosts of history is not to do so through the document or a grand historical fact that points to the document as a solution at the end of a straight line—or that the document can be used to refresh history’s memory when it risks forgetting—but is in fact to do so through the disappeared and apparitions themselves. Corral’s time at the UN, she observed cases of women and students who had disappeared under the auspices of state-sponsored terror. Illegal abduction by police and military squads, detention of victims, torture, sometimes death followed by an improper burial and denial by authorities on a governmental level are characteristics of the organized system of oppression known as disappearance. During these hearings, the state of Chihuahua was sued for failing to properly investigate the cases. The cases that Corral observed represented only a small fraction of the hundreds of victims of disappearance in Latin America, thousands if we count those who are lost on their way to North America in a stream of enforced international trade of human property.

## **TRANSIENT LANDSCAPES**

Corral’s installation at Rio Vista Farm is the first of her investigations into the hypervisible symbols that permeate our everyday. These are the symbols that are embedded within our individual and collective psyches so that their original meaning might be lost within current renderings. The parallel histories of social and political life

can be found in the built environment, which reveals those whose invisibility is desired, created, and maintained vis-a-vis the structures they inhabit. The built environment has the ability to show us something that may largely be unsaid or unseen, but nonetheless remains. As Margolles' *La Promesa* investigates, even when cultures are threatened by elimination, the physical remnants of a community under siege leave their trace.<sup>47</sup>

The built environment became the subject of Corral's latest large-scale installation, *Unearthed: Desenterrado*, installed at Rio Vista Farm, a former processing center for the Bracero Program just outside of El Paso, Texas.<sup>48</sup> In 1942, the Bracero Program was created to supplement US agricultural and railroad sectors while American men were away at war. It is considered to be the largest foreign worker program in US history. In 22 years, the program had offered temporary worker contracts to 5 million braceros in 24 US states. From 1951 until 1964, Rio Vista Farm processed more than 80,000 Mexican workers per year. The program lasted long after the war ended as contractors became increasingly dependent on the cheap labor and willing workers despite harsh and unfair working conditions. By the time the program ended in 1964, bribery and corruption among contractors was common and had led to an increase in undocumented immigration to the US from Mexico with support from the US labor market. More than 50 years after the termination of the program, the supply of cheap Mexican laborers continues to be in high demand despite the increase of border hysteria,

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<sup>47</sup> See Figure 10 on page 48.

<sup>48</sup> The artist worked with Sehila Casper from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to name the farm a National Treasure of the National Trust, and thus, have the land and buildings protected against the encroaching urban expanse of El Paso, Texas. For more information on the project, visit <https://savingplaces.org/places/rio-vista#.XL39i-tKjKY>

xenophobic and racist rhetoric surrounding immigrants within the US. Control over these bodies represents the economic control that the US has in the region; thus, control of these bodies is a way in which hemispheric dominance is asserted and maintained.

Corral's installation at the center featured a 60-foot flag pole with a white cotton flag embroidered with the American bald eagle on one side of the fabric and the Mexican golden eagle on the other. The flag flew for three months from March through June of 2018, allowing just enough time for the harsh desert winds to weather nearly half of the flag into shreds. Here, the mangled flag stands in for the bodies of braceros that were exposed to the elements and harsh working conditions for less than minimum wage or, more often, no pay at all. At the end of the installation, the white flag was taken down, but the flag pole remained. Community members replaced the white flag with a flag of the United States that flies on the site today.

The location where Corral placed the flagpole is the same place where US and Mexican flags flew welcoming braceros to the camp. The flag has become the ultimate device through which propaganda can be displayed in the public square: they are large, highly visible, and mutable in their ability to represent anything to many people at once. In discussing the totalitarian movement, Arendt elaborates on the way in which leaders create and maintain control over the masses, "Everything hidden, everything passed over in silence, become of major significance, regardless of its own intrinsic importance."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 351.

The flag, here, symbolizes the cumulative structures and forms of socialization that are produced and maintained by nation-states, the community, and individual subjects.

Flags fly above the people who are asked to perform underneath them: they dwarf the human body who stands underneath it and is visible along the horizon at a distance. Yet, there are so many flags that scatter the landscape, that occasionally the flag itself could be rendered invisible by the sheer fact of its cultural and architectural prominence. Underneath these flags, we recite our pledges of allegiance to our respective countries; it is not rational but symbolizes the romance of sovereignty. Achille Mbembé distinguishes between reason and unreason, passion and fantasy by defining this romance as,

the belief that the subject is the master and controlling author of his or her own meaning. Sovereignty is therefore defined as a twofold process of *self-institution* and *self-limitation* (fixing one's own limits for oneself). The exercise of sovereignty, in turn, consists in society's capacity for self-creation through recourse to institutions inspired by special social and imaginary significations.<sup>50</sup>

This sense of division is not only geographic in the separation of space and territory in the borderlands, but also the idealization of binaries such as good-bad, us-them, white-nonwhite that determine which side of sovereignty an individual may fall, or, in this case, which side of a flag an eagle is stitched on. Mbembé states that “the ultimate

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<sup>50</sup>J.-A Mbembé, "Necropolitics," in *Project Muse*, previously published in *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2–3): 11-40, 13.

expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.”<sup>51</sup>

Corral embroidered the American eagle on one side of the flag and the Mexican eagle on the other, embodying the idealized binary prevalent within the borderlands. She traced the two eagles onto the cotton flag using ashes from the UDHR. In this context, the use of this document serves as a reminder of the socialization tied to objects such as flags or national emblems such as the bald eagle. The visibility of these material objects maintains a certain status and identity, which is subject to be modified or lost within the speed of history. *Unearthed* explores the potential of what might happen when the system of rule dissolves and is replaced by another. This is represented by the many flags that have flown at Rio Vista: her white flag stood where Mexican and US flags flew during the Bracero Program next to a sign that said “Welcome Braceros” accompanied by a mariachi band, and last year, her white flag was replaced solely by a flag of the United States.

The ephemeral nature of the flag that Corral erected suggests that systems of power have the ability to crumble despite the documents, doctrines, and monuments that suggest stability and permanence. Through the use of ephemerality, Corral investigates exactly how precarious not only minority positionalities remain in this country, but also the precariousness of political leaders, regimes, nations and the images that identify them as such.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, page 11



Social rights, human rights, and injustice cannot be addressed in the systems that are in place because these systems rely on the creation of binaries—us-them, invisible-visible, erased-lasting. The irony of going to war for peace. Police violence, mass incarceration, eugenics as a form of medical gatekeeping, and economic and military intervention in Latin America make up just a few of the systems of oppression that the US relies on to promise freedom, liberty and justice to some of its citizens. How do these two examples that exist in our visual culture work together to blur the lines between ephemerality and permanence? Is the violence disguised by cumulative structures such as economic or foreign policies—such as a foreign worker program—be structurally similar to the violence enacted on the victims of enforced disappearances? Perhaps the two forms of violence are not, in fact, separate at all, but rather intrinsically linked by shared moral and ethical principles, or lack thereof, but only circulate differently through our *perception* of hierarchical systems of control.

## Conclusion: Leaving Traces

“Under the soil is a little tickle of knowledge

The great blind roots will tease through

And push eventually past”

- Terry K. Smith, 1972 “Everything That Ever Was

In Texas, no one believes that history could bloody the land, let alone touch it. Texas state pride is bound up in land by the sheer fact that there is so much of it: 790 miles long and 660 miles wide at its most distant points. The landscape is defined not necessarily by emptiness or negative space, but a kind of positive vastness that is full of potential. Texas itself ends at the Gulf of Mexico at one end, and El Paso on the other, where I began this story. To drive across the state is to experience the open space on which manifest destiny relies, the notion that if you keep going west you might find something. Or if you dig deeper into an archive, you will find what you were looking for.

There is a heightened sense of urgency in the desert landscape of the borderlands—here, I am thinking of South Texas and Northern Mexico— a place that persists as a place of hybridity where invisible borders seek to divide seemingly disparate groups: US-Mexico, Latinxs-non-Latinxs, men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, and other groups. One among several, of Gloria Anzaldúa’s elaborations on the meaning of border in her 1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera* address false binaries that invisible borders create,

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.<sup>52</sup>

The borderlands hold all of history, including its dualities, its foils, and binaries. It endures our mistakes, holds our dead, passes between hands as a commodity, a status symbol, and a right of citizenship to which only few have access.

Once the western frontier was settled, the US turned its gaze southward. The settler colonial mentality on which the US was founded is still very much in effect and is evidenced by the heightened sense of xenophobia and racist rhetoric surrounding the borderlands. It was the racialized subordination of black and brown bodies that affirmed a right to settle the frontier. And it is from these same bodies on whom US economic prosperity is built and is still maintained. The history of property ownership, which has supported symbiosis between white supremacy and economic domination through racial subordination, has not expanded far past the antiquated notion that to own property, one must be a white man.<sup>53</sup> The body and land are continually interconnected: the body works the land and the land has come to symbolize notions as complex as nationhood, belonging, and difference.

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<sup>52</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La Frontera*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), [Page 3].

<sup>53</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, whiteness as property to *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, et al. (New York, NY: The New Press, 1995).

The day I visited *Unearthed: Desenterrado* was the same day that Corral took the flag down. Like most other days, I was told, the wind would be strong. I took a mental note, but I was not fully prepared for what I encountered. The excursion to Rio Vista Farm took about forty-five minutes from El Paso proper. We drove along the Texas-Mexico border, where layer upon layer of fence, barbed wire, empty concrete river bed, more fence, divided us from Mexico, making the invisible border something you couldn't miss. Socorro, where the farm is located, was previously isolated from the city of El Paso, but has in recent years been encroached upon by the city's growing urban expanse. I was surprised when we reached the farm, as it was sandwiched between residential housing and a police station.

I did not notice the wind when we were driving, only the heat on the leather seats and the dust in my lungs from the arid climate to which I was unaccustomed. Once we arrived at the farm, I quickly learned that the buildings themselves, which are laid out in a horseshoe shape, produce a wind corridor, not only shredding the fabric of the flag, but also creating a full body sensorial experience for the viewer. There was no museum staff to sterilize this viewing experience, no gallery attendant telling me to put on little cotton booties, no object conservator removing the dirt so that an object could be safely exhibited without the threat of external life seeping into the exhibition space. I inhaled dirt and almost instantly I felt it coat my lungs, then I looked down and my hands, feet, and clothing had a light brown coating on top; a second skin.

Corral's takes soil from these sites, concentration camps, and sometimes this involves doing so illicitly. Behind her intensive research-based practice is the work of an

anthropologist conducting fieldwork to in order to prove something to be authentic, something to be truthful, or to salvage some past through its material remains. Her practice involves collecting things through not only excavation or unearthing histories that are threatened to be forgotten, but in some cases, she takes these things and submerges them deeper in the ground. In the context of *Unearthed: Desenterrado*, Corral questions what stories the land tells that memory keeping institutions do not.

Previously in this text, I've discussed the notion of inheritance, the politics of representation, and the relationship between empire, invisibility, and the border. But the underlying concern is how these structures shape what we remember, and how. Forgetting is the biggest threat to historical erasure, so how, as a historian, do I combat this?

I asked Corral about how her practice incorporates archiving as a way to remember. Her response revealed to me the time capsules she plants, the hidden part of her practice that is unseen. *Sous Rature*, *Unearthed: Desenterrado*, and now, *Requiem*, incorporate time capsules. She told me that *Sous Rature* was the first: in the burial plot in the gallery at Artpace, she planted letters from the other exhibiting artists and the curator wrote text regarding human rights and questioning if they are upheld. She continued,

To follow was *Unearthed: Desenterrado*. In that time capsule I wrote about the flag, its history, those involved who helped me and placed clippings of the flag. Once the contractors dug the hole for the flagpole (which is also 6ft deep) I laid the time capsule. It lies beneath the flagpole. Vincent [Valdez] and I placed a time capsule in the bronzed eagle, *Requiem*. There is text about the piece, who

helped, our collaboration, a paint brush of Vincent's and an ash pastel stick by me. It is encased in steel and welded into the head of the eagle.”<sup>54</sup>

It was at this moment that I questioned my understanding of the artist as ethnographer, somebody who conducts archaeological digs to excavate something and assign it meaning so that we don't forget. Corral, here, conceals the objects and the language that mean something to her. Underneath the US flag that now flies at Rio Vista Farm are Corral's musings on the Bracero Program. She embedded herself into the land and she will be found (or not found) by someone else digging deep in hopes of finding something.

This thesis has sought to understand not only how we remember, but how visual culture aids or dismisses our tools for remembering. There are the things we know, or think we do—such as geometry, the document, the archive, a national emblem—and then there are the things we don't know, or can't see unless we squint our eyes hard enough—ashes on the ground, names stamped onto a wall, or white embroidery on a white flag. And of course, there are the things that are buried so deep that we only find them if we dig just a little bit deeper and try to investigate our ways of seeing—or sometimes unseeing—our way through history.

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<sup>54</sup> Email correspondence from the artist on February 22, 2019.

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## Vita

Emily Butts was born in 1993 in Austin, Texas, where she grew up. She received her undergraduate degree from Pitzer College in Claremont, California, where she studied art history and English World Literature. Prior to returning to graduate school, she served as the curatorial assistant at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art for the exhibition “Home—So Different, So Appealing,” which was on view as part of the Getty Foundation’s *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* initiative. In 2018, she was granted the Emerging Curator award from Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions for the exhibition “Names Printed in Black”, which explored ethical and aesthetic threads that form collective political and human histories. In 2019, she received her master’s degree in Art History from the University of Texas at Austin.

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